



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Tracking the history of Alexandria's Union Station

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Image: Alexandria's Union Station from an early postcard. Office of Historic Alexandria.

A recent listing on the Virginia Landmarks Register is the Alexandria Union Station, which is the city's only public building constructed in the Colonial Revival style. Built in 1905 and designed by the Pennsylvania Railroad's office of the chief engineer in Philadelphia, the passenger station's name was derived from its development as a "union" station through the consolidation of rail lines in Alexandria.

Inspiration for the building's design and architectural elements drew from the urban planning movement known as the City Beautiful that developed in Washington, D.C., during the same time period. This new era was a prominent change from the design of public buildings as mere service and function to one of civic pride, which was marked by superior detailing and promoting a sense of arrival via a municipal gateway.

The building represented the golden age of rail travel, which lasted from the late 19th century until the Depression years of the 1930s.

When first built, the [Alexandria Union Station](#) was located in a somewhat rural area, more than a mile from downtown Alexandria. Yet the location was specifically selected to take advantage of transportation routes from the west.

The station's site was near the confluence of Duke and King streets, which brought cattle and agricultural produce from the Little River Turnpike and Leesburg Pike, respectively. However, construction of the passenger and freight facility quickly led to major commercial expansion along both streets — from the new transportation center toward the Potomac River. Soon new residential areas, such as Rosemont, developed nearby as well, luring early commuters to what became a choice suburb quickly linked to the nation's capital.

With the development of the George Washington Memorial Parkway in 1932, as well as additional new highways after World War II, rail traffic dropped significantly, and the building became neglected. But adjacent construction of the Washington Metro Rail in the 1980s and restoration of the station by the City of Alexandria in 1997 has maintained the prominence of this magnificent building.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.